

Study Guide and Commentary

ACIM® Text, Chapter 27

Healing the Ancient Dream

Section IX

The Dreamer of the Dream

Explanation of underlining, italics and footnote formats can be found at the end of the commentary.

Overview of Section IX

This section delves deeply into the notion that you and I “are the dreamer of the world of dreams,” the world of suffering, and that this dreaming and our ignorance of ourselves as the dreamer is due to deeply buried guilt over our belief that we have ruptured the Unity of God and split ourselves off from that Unity. The fact that the cause of our suffering is within our own mind is actually good news, because it puts us in charge of our own destiny.

Paragraph 1

Once, you were unaware of what the cause of everything the world appeared to thrust upon you, uninvited and unasked, must really be.¹ ²Of one thing you were sure: Of all the many causes you perceived as bringing pain and suffering to you, your guilt was *not* among them. ³Nor did you in any way request them for yourself. ⁴This is how all illusions come about. ⁵The one who makes them does not see himself as making them, and their reality does not depend on him. ⁶Whatever cause they have is something quite apart from him, and what he sees is separate from his mind. ⁷He cannot doubt his dreams’ reality because he does not see the part he plays in making them, and making them seem real.

The cause of everything in the world! This message has been presented often before, for instance when discussing the “laws of chaos” in Chapter 23:

You who believe you walk in sanity with feet on solid ground, and through a world where meaning can be found, consider this: These *are* the laws on which

¹. “Once” means before you studied the Course. The assumption here is that the Course has been opening your eyes to the role that guilt has in “bringing pain and suffering to you,” and even in bringing “painful” events into your life.

your “sanity” appears to rest. These *are* the principles which make the ground beneath your feet seem solid (T-23.II.13:4-5).

Jesus has recently informed us in a very clear manner that “the cause of everything the world appeared to thrust upon you, uninvited and unasked” (1:1) is the moment when “the first attack upon yourself” began “in separation from your brother” (T-27.VIII.6:3), “where your guilt was first beheld” (T-27.VIII.6:2). He has said plainly, “Seek not another cause” beside this primal guilt (T-27.VIII.6:4). In fact, he made this unmistakably plain back in Chapter 13, Section I:

For the mind that judges perceives itself as separate from the mind being judged, believing that by punishing another, it will escape punishment. All this is but the delusional attempt of the mind to deny itself and escape the penalty of denial. It is not an attempt to relinquish denial, but to hold on to it. **For it is guilt that has obscured the Father to you, and it is guilt that has driven you insane.** The acceptance of guilt into the mind of God’s Son was the beginning of the separation, as the acceptance of the Atonement is its end.

The world you see is the delusional system of those made mad by guilt. Look carefully at this world, and you will realize that this is so. For this world is the symbol of punishment, and all the laws which seem to govern it are the laws of death. Children are born into it through pain and in pain. Their growth is attended by suffering, and they learn of sorrow and separation and death. Their minds are trapped in their brain, and its powers decline if their bodies are hurt. They seem to love, yet they desert and are deserted. They appear to lose what they love, perhaps the most insane belief of all. And their bodies wither and gasp and are laid in the ground and are no more. Not one of them but has thought that God is cruel.

If this were the real world, God would be cruel, for no father could subject his children to this as the price of salvation and be loving. (T-13.I.2–4:1)

So when he says, “Once you were unaware of what the cause of everything” in the world that seems to attack us really is, Jesus generously assumes that we remember what he has taught us. *Once* we were unaware. *Now* we know that the world we see is “the delusional system of those made mad by guilt”; we know that “it is guilt that has driven you insane.” Prior to our study of the Course, we were very sure that our guilt had nothing to do with bringing pain and suffering to us (1:1–2). Sadly, some of us still are not convinced! He says that “once” we were sure that we in no way *requested* pain and suffering (1:3). Do you understand clearly now that you *did* request them? That’s what he’s been driving at in this entire chapter.

When we forget we are the cause, this is the way we make illusions (1:4). Our minds make the illusions, but we do it in such an unconscious way that we do not see what we are doing and we are unaware that their seeming reality depends on *us* (1:5). The cause of what we see or experience seems to be “something quite apart” from us, separate from our minds (1:6). The dreams we are making don’t seem like dreams at all, but utterly real.

This is purely because we fail to see ourselves as the maker of dreams; we are “making them seem real” (1:7).

The Workbook begins to approach this idea—that we make the dreams we see—as early as Lesson 2: “I have given everything I see all the meaning that it has for me.” Then, in Lesson 11, Jesus goes at it more directly: “My meaningless thoughts are showing me a meaningless world.” In the first paragraph he says,

It seems as if the world determines what you perceive. Today's idea introduces the concept that your thoughts determine the world you see.... The key to forgiveness lies in it.

Lesson 15 speaks of it, as does Lesson 22: “What I see is a form of vengeance.” It teaches us, “Having projected his anger onto the world, he sees vengeance about to strike at him.” Lesson 23 adds, “Every thought you have makes up some segment of the world you see. It is with your thoughts, then, that we must work” (W-23.1.4–5). It says further, “If the cause of the world you see is attack thoughts, you must learn that it is these thoughts that you do not want” (W-23.2:1). “You see the images that you have made, but you do not see yourself as the image maker” (W-23.4:1). And then the way out: “The idea for today introduces the thought that you are not trapped in the world you see, because its cause can be changed. This change requires, first, that the cause be identified, and then let go, so that it can be replaced” (T-23.5:1–2).

And there, in a nutshell, is the whole plan of salvation in the Course, the same plan that is being expanded on in this section. Identify the cause, let it go, let it be replaced.

Paragraph 2

2 No one can waken from a dream the world is dreaming *for* him. ²He becomes a part of someone *else's* dream. ³He cannot choose to waken from a dream he did not make. ⁴Helpless he stands, a victim to a dream conceived and cherished by a separate mind.² ⁵Careless indeed of him this mind must be, as thoughtless of his peace and happiness as is the weather or the time of day. ⁶It loves him not, but casts him as it will in any role that satisfies its dream. ⁷So little is his worth that he is but a dancing shadow, leaping up and down according to a senseless plot conceived within the idle dreaming of the world.³

² The “separate mind” here is whatever force is running the show on earth, whether that force is literally a mind or is just an impersonal force that we personify.

³ The image here of the “dancing shadow,” a spectral puppet that the world “casts” in a “role,” and that leaps up and down according to a “senseless plot,” is an allusion to Macbeth’s famous speech in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Macbeth*:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale*

Why is it so important for me to recognize that I am the cause of what I see? Because if I think what I'm seeing is real and not my dream, it's as if I'm letting the world dream *for* me. The cause isn't me; it's outside of me. In that scenario it's impossible for me to wake up from the dream (2:1). I'm part of someone else's dream. The dream is not under my control; therefore, I cannot choose to wake up from it (2:2–3). I'm a helpless "victim to a dream conceived and cherished by a separate mind" (2:4). The CE has a helpful footnote to the words, "separate mind":

The "separate mind" here is whatever force is running the show on earth, whether that force is literally a mind or is just an impersonal force that we personify.

It doesn't make any difference whether the force behind the dream is personal, such as all the other people in the world, or a vindictive God, or just blind chance. If it's not *me*, I cannot change the dream or escape from it.

This separate mind is "careless" of us, and "thoughtless" of our well-being, like the weather or the time of day. The weather doesn't care how it affects us; the march of time goes on regardless of how we feel about it (2:5). This mind determines the role we play in its dream. It does not love us, and at times it seems to hate us and be determined to crush us (2:6). If there is a force outside us directing the dream, we are irrelevant to it. It treats us like a puppet, dragging us through senseless and meaningless activity in a senseless and meaningless dream (2:7).⁴

Has your life ever seemed like that? Have you ever wondered who's in charge, or if anyone at all is in charge? Have you ever considered that it might be *you*?

Paragraph 3

3 This is the only picture you can see, the one alternative that you can choose, the other possibility of cause, if you be *not* the dreamer of your dreams. ²And this is what you choose if you deny the cause of suffering is in your mind. ³Be glad indeed it is, for thus are *you* the one decider of your destiny in time. ⁴The choice is yours to make between a sleeping death and dreams of evil, or a happy waking and joy of life. ⁵What could you choose between but life or death, waking or sleeping, war or peace, your dream or your reality? ⁶But if the choice is really given you, then you must see the causes of the things you choose between exactly *as* they are and *where* they are.

*Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

In the Course's version, we seem to be the puppets of this senseless tale because the circumstances of our lives are being dreamt by our unconscious guilt.

⁴ Check out the footnote in the CE about the reference to Shakespeare, one of Helen's favorites.

That depressing, meaningless picture of life is really the only one possible if you are *not* the cause, the dreamer of your dreams (3:1). If not you, who? If you deny that “the cause of suffering is in your mind,” you are choosing to believe that your life is “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (3:2).

Jesus appeals to us to be very glad that the cause of suffering *is* in your mind! Why glad? Because that fact makes you “the *one* decider of your destiny in time” (3:3). I like the emphasis on “one.” You are not sharing the function with anyone or anything; it’s all up to you. Which way your life plays out — “a sleeping death and dreams of evil, or a happy waking and joy of life” — *is* your choice, and yours alone (3:4). That is the Truth that the Course is urging us, urging *you*, to recognize and accept. What other choices are possible? Your dream, or reality? Life, or death? War, or peace? But to make this understanding practical in your life, it’s essential that “you see the causes of the things you choose *between* exactly *as* they are and *where* they are” (3:6).

Paragraph 4

4 What choices can be made between two states, but one of which is clearly recognized? ²Who could be free to choose between effects when only one is seen as up to him? ³An honest choice could never be perceived as one in which the choice is split between a tiny you and an enormous world, with different dreams about the truth in you.⁵ ⁴The gap between reality and dreams lies not between the dreaming of the world and what you dream in secret. ⁵They are one. ⁶The dreaming of the world is but the part of your own dream you gave away, and saw as if it were its start and ending, both. ⁷Yet was it started by your secret dream, which you do not perceive although it caused the part you see and do not doubt is real.

In other words, you need to realize that things like war and death are unreal parts of an unreal dream in your mind, and that peace and life are reality. Both of them are up to you (3:1–2). It isn’t enough to recognize what reality is; you have to identify what belongs to the dream. How else could you choose between them? You are not choosing between what you want and what the world wants for you (3:3); both are up to you. The footnote to 4:2 points out that we typically view our lives as a conflict between our personal wishes and dreams and the conflicting force of the world around us (4:4). That isn’t “an honest choice,” Jesus says. Both the dreaming of the world and our personal dreams are actually one and the same thing (4:5). We are the sole dreamer here. What *seems* to be the plan (or lack of it) of the world outside of us is only the part of our dream that we “gave away,” projecting it out onto the world we made to be our scapegoat (4:6). We imagine that the dream of the world starts and ends outside of us. It doesn’t. It had its

⁵ The idea here is that we seem constantly forced to choose between our hopes and dreams for ourselves and what the world dreams for us (which is that we serve as mere pawns in its game). Yet this is not an honest choice, because we dishonestly deny that the dream of the world is up to us and because we dishonestly “do not perceive” (4:7) the real content of our own private dream (explained in the next paragraph).

start in our “*secret dream*” (the dream of separation), a dream we’ve buried so deep we can’t even see it “although it caused the part you see and do not doubt is real” (4:7).

This is once again a very clear reference to what I’ve called our primal guilt or existential guilt, something so deeply hidden in our minds we don’t see it, are unaware of it, although it completely orchestrates our lives.

Paragraph 5

5 How could you doubt it while you lie asleep and dream in secret that its cause is real? ²A brother separated from yourself, an ancient enemy, a murderer who stalks you in the night and plots your death, yet plans that it be lingering and slow—of this you dream. ³And *underneath* this dream is yet another, in which *you* become the murderer, the secret enemy, the scavenger and the destroyer of the brother and the world you fear alike. ⁴Here is the cause of suffering, the space between your dreams and your reality. ⁵The little gap you do not even see, the birthplace of illusions and of fear, the time of terror and of ancient hate, the instant of disaster—all are here. ⁶Here is the *cause* of unreality. ⁷And it is here that it will be undone.

We don’t doubt the reality of the world we see, the suffering we see, and Jesus understands the reason: “How *could* you doubt it while you lie asleep and dream in secret that its *cause* is real” (5:1)? That “dream in secret” refers to that primal guilt; we secretly dream that we succeeded in separating from God, and that we are eternally guilty for it. That guilt is the cause of what we see.

There are apparently two levels to the secret dream. Nearest to the surface is the dream of “a brother separated from yourself,” who has been “an ancient enemy, a murderer who stalks you in the night and plots your death, yet plans that it be lingering and slow” (5:2). Not that we are conscious of this dream or that we consciously think of our brother or sister in this way. But below the level of consciousness this dream festers, surfacing in lingering suspicions and mistrust of the motives of others.

If I understand correctly, we have this secret dream because we believe we have grievously and eternally wronged those we have chosen to separate from. And that leads to the even deeper dream, “in which *you* become the murderer, the secret enemy, the scavenger and the destroyer of the brother and the world you fear alike” (5:3).

The deeper dream is the dream of guilt, guilt for having destroyed your brother’s life and the whole world as well! In the Course’s understanding of us, we all carry this dark dream of unbelievably profound guilt for shattering the fabric of the universe, a dream “doubly shielded by oblivion”⁶ This subterranean dream is “the cause of suffering, the space between your dreams and your reality” (5:4). I think that “your dreams” here refers to the conscious dreams we all have about what we wish for in life, what we can do and be and become.

⁶ "It is this quick forgetting of the part you play in making your "reality" that makes defenses seem to be beyond your own control. But what you have forgot can be remembered, given willingness to reconsider the decision which is doubly shielded by oblivion. " (W-pl.136.5:1-2 (FIP)).

What separates our conscious dreams from our reality is this hidden dream of guilt. It makes up “the little gap you do not even see.” From it spring all of our illusions and fears. It holds that ancient time of terror in which we *think* we separated from God and our brothers, the instant of imagined disaster in which we destroyed the unity of Heaven (5:5). This secret, shrouded⁷ dream is “the *cause* of unreality” (5:6). It lurks in the dark recesses of our mind, and *it is in our mind that it will be undone* (5:7).

Paragraph 6

6 You are the dreamer of the world of dreams. ²No other cause it has, nor ever will. ³Nothing more fearful than an idle dream has terrified God's Son and made him think that he has lost his innocence, denied his Father, and made war upon himself. ⁴So fearful is the dream, so seeming real, he could not waken to reality without the sweat of terror and a scream of mortal fear, unless a gentler dream preceded his awaking and allowed his calmer mind to welcome, not to fear, the Voice that called with love to waken him. ⁵A gentler dream, in which his suffering was healed, and where his brother was his friend. ⁶God willed he waken gently and with joy, and gave him means to waken without fear.

How can it be undone? It can be undone because, “*You are the dreamer of the world of dreams*” (6 :1). If you are the dreamer, you can wake up. You can purge the dream from your mind. The world of dreams has no other cause than you, “nor ever will” (6:2).

The whole black nightmare is nothing more than “an idle dream.” The word “idle” is interesting here. My thesaurus has many synonyms for it, but one set I think is particularly applicable:

empty, meaningless, aimless, pointless, worthless, useless, vain, in vain, insubstantial, futile, ineffective, ineffectual; groundless, without grounds, baseless, without/lacking foundation.

This dream that “terrified God's Son” is meaningless, futile, groundless. The whole idea that God's Son (us) “lost his innocence, denied his Father, and made war upon himself” is utterly without foundation (6:3). It never happened!

Yet we have bought into it hook, line and sinker. It's such a fearful idea. It seems so real to us that we can't ever peel back the veil behind which we've hidden it “without the

⁷ I use the word “shrouded” because of this passage from Chapter 31: “Here is the central lesson that ensures your brother is condemned eternally, for what you are has now become his sin. For this is no forgiveness possible. No longer does it matter what he does, for your accusing finger points to him, unwavering and deadly in its aim. It points to you as well, but this is kept still deeper in the mists below the face of innocence. And in these shrouded vaults are all his sins and yours preserved and kept in darkness, where they cannot be perceived as errors, which the light would surely show. You can be neither blamed for what you are, nor can you change the things it makes you do. And you are each the symbol of your sins to one another, silently and yet with ceaseless urgency condemning still your brother for the hated thing you are. (T-31.V.5:1–7 (CE))

sweat of terror and a scream of mortal fear” (6:4) — *unless* God first grants us “a gentler dream” that calms our minds and allows us to welcome “the Voice that called with love to waken” us (6:4).

What kind of gentler dream? One in which we are healed of our suffering. One in which our brother is seen no longer as an ancient, murdering enemy, but as our friend (6:5). That is God’s will for us, that gentler awakening that comes with joy and without fear (6:6). It is the dream of absolute forgiveness.

Paragraph 7

7 Accept the dream He gave instead of yours. ²It is not difficult to shift a dream when once the dreamer has been recognized. ³Rest in the Holy Spirit, and allow His gentle dreams to take the place of those you dreamed in terror and in fear of death. ⁴He brings forgiving dreams, in which the choice is not who is the murderer and who shall be the victim. ⁵In the dreams He brings, there is no murder and there is no death. ⁶The dream of guilt is fading from your sight, although your eyes are closed. ⁷A smile has come to lighten up your sleeping face. ⁸The sleep is peaceful now, for these are happy dreams. ⁹Dream softly of your sinless brother, who unites with you in holy innocence. ¹⁰And from *this* dream the Lord of Heaven will Himself awaken His beloved Son.

What are we to do? Just accept the dream of forgiveness God has given us, allowing it to replace our dream of sin and terror (7:1). It isn’t that hard, once you recognize that you are the dreamer of the dream (7:2). It’s not a struggle at all; it is a coming to *rest*, resting in the Holy Spirit while He gently shifts our dreams from terror to forgiveness (7:3–4). We typically live with the choice of who is victim and who the murderer, but in the dreams the Holy Spirit brings “there is no murder and there is no death” (7:4–5).

We will still be dreaming; our “eyes are closed,” but “the dream of guilt is fading from your sight” (7:6). We smile as we sleep, peacefully, with happy dreams (7:7–8). To say we are still sleeping, our eyes still closed, means that we do not leave the world. We still live in the illusion. We still have bodies. But we see it all differently now. We are dreaming softly of a brother who is “sinless,” and who “unites with you in holy innocence” (7:9). It’s no longer a dream in which we each symbolize one another’s sins; now, we mirror one another’s innocence.

Soon, once we have settled into this holy dream, “the Lord of Heaven will Himself awaken His beloved Son” (7:10). We will waken to reality without any scream of terror. We will be joyously at home in God, where we have always been.

Paragraph 8

8 Dream of your brother's kindnesses, instead of dwelling in your dreams on his mistakes. ²Select his thoughtfulness to dream about, instead of counting up the hurts he gave. ³Forgive him his illusions, and give thanks to him for all the helpfulness he gave. ⁴And do not brush aside his many gifts because he is not perfect in your dreams. ⁵He represents His Father, Whom you see as offering both life *and* death to you. ⁶Brother, He gives but life, yet what you see as gifts your brother offers represents the gifts you dream your Father gives to you.⁸ ⁷Let all your brother's gifts be seen in light of charity and kindness offered you. ⁸And let no pain disturb your dream of deep appreciation for his gifts to you.

How then shall we live in this gentler dream?

This final paragraph paints a clear picture; it needs very little commentary, if any.

One line I very much want us to take to heart, sentence 4. Our brothers may not be perfect in our dreams, but we must not let that cause us to “brush aside his many gifts.”

Perhaps the last two sentences also merit a comment or two. They are challenging because, if we take them at face value as we should and apply them to our lives and our relationships, they are truly revolutionary. Imagine seeing all your brother's “gifts” “in light of charity and kindness offered to you”! Imagine accepting all your brothers and sisters with “deep appreciation for his/her gifts to you.”

⁸. This means that your brother as he shows up in your external dream is a dream symbol for what you believe your Father offers you. For example, if you believe God wants to punish you for your sins, you will dream of brothers who serve as dream symbols of His wrath—brothers who punish you by attacking you.

Legend:

Light underscoring indicates emphasis that appears in the Urtext or shorthand notes.

The Text is taken from the Circle of Atonement's Complete and Annotated Edition (which I refer to as the "CE" for "Complete Edition" or "Circle Edition"). Please be aware that, even when the wording is identical to the FIP version, the division into paragraphs is often entirely different in the CE, which restores the paragraph breaks found in the original notes. This results in different reference numbering as well. I will indicate for each paragraph the corresponding sentences in the FIP edition. You should be able to locate specific sentences in that edition if you need to, with a minimum of visual clutter in the commentary. Passages that lie outside the current section will continue to have footnoted references. References to quotations are from the CE unless another version is being quoted, in which case that version is indicated.

Footnotes by the commentary author are shown in this font and size. Other footnotes come from the Complete Edition itself.